O SING
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Psalm 96:1-9

Every year as I begin to think about preparing my Easter sermon, I remember something Reinhold Niebuhr said once. Niebuhr came out of the German Reformed tradition and was a pretty good preacher. But on Easter and Christmas he and his wife always attended a high church, Episcopal or Lutheran, I suspect. The reason, he said, is that liturgy is far more capable of carrying the weight of the occasion. No preacher is up to the Incarnation or Resurrection. Better to turn the agenda over to the musicians and artists and poets.

Which is a way of saying how happy I am to be at a Lutheran Institute of Liturgical Studies, even though I'll be talking when I'd rather be listening.

And I am thrilled to be in this stunning chapel. I was a student pastor many years ago in a little town west of here, Dyer, Indiana. And whenever we had visitors — our parents mostly, from Western Pennsylvania, we always drove them to Valparaiso to look at the Chapel. We and they had never seen anything like it — and it still lifts up my heart and spirit.

I'm also feeling the need to establish some Lutheran credentials. Joseph Sittler was my professor, mentor, and preached at my Installation. Martin Marty writes for *The Christian Century* and is a good friend. Lutheran theologian Walter Bouman was also a great friend and talked his Trinity Lutheran Seminary faculty in Columbus into inviting me to speak at Commencement and gave me a Lutheran hood. Best of all — I married a Lutheran in a Lutheran Church — and she remains adamant and unconverted: became a Presbyterian only when she had to — for appearances, and I suspect will return home, to the one true church, as soon as the opportunity presents itself.

In a little book, *God Laughs and* Plays, David James Duncan tells about being kicked out of his church one day when he was twelve years old.

He and a group of friends had sneaked into the sanctuary of his church, and he was entertaining them by playing the Ramsey Lewis version of "Hang on Sloopy" on the church's big grand piano. They were caught—by one of the Elders, a man Duncan describes as "veiny with rage." I can almost see him, can't you?

“This is God’s house!” the man roared in Duncan’s face.

“That was Ramsey Lewis’s music,” Duncan peeped in reply.

“Get out!” the man bellowed, seizing the boy by the scruff of his collar.

“OK,” Duncan said, and he left—and hasn’t been back since (*God Laughs and Plays,* pp. 10–11).

That story is vaguely familiar to me and perhaps to many of you. I learned a progression of cool jazz chords and tried them out on a pipe organ once — and they sounded great. Duncan remembers his earliest experience with religion. His mother, grandmother, and great grandmother were staunch members of an “apocalypse-preaching, fundamentalist sect” that had first predicted the second coming of Jesus and the rapture in the 1840s. When it didn’t happen, the leaders of the movement did the next best thing and organized a church.

“These strong women gave their offspring no choice but to attend these same churches and share their faith, so attend and share we did.”

His father and grandfather, however, did not, nor did any of his friends at school. He and the other members of his church were “saved,” he explains; “no eternal hellfire for me—whereas my father, grandfather, and school friends were, according to our preachers, impending toast.”

“Sound suspicious to you?” he asks and then comments:

> “It sure did to me. Intense spiritual feelings were frequent visitors during my boyhood, but they did not come from church-going or from bargaining with God through prayer. The connection I felt to the Creator came, unmediated, from the Creation itself. The spontaneous gratitude I felt for birds and birdsong, tree-covered or snow-capped mountains, rivers and their trout, moon and starlight, summer winds on wilderness lakes became the spiritual instructors of my boyhood. . . . [In nature] I felt linked to powers and mysteries I could sincerely imagine calling the Presence of God.”

Duncan’s argument is that we have an innate sense of wonder and awe in us, an innate sense of God, if you will. And what blocks it, knocks it out of us, ironically, oftentimes is religion. Institutional religion, in his experience, doesn’t have much room for wonder in it, but it does have a lot of certainty.

He writes, “In fifteen years of churchgoing I did not once feel this same sense of Presence” that he did in nature. “What I felt instead was a lot of heavily-agenda-ed, fear-based information being shoved at me by men on the church payroll. Though these men claimed to speak for God, I was never convinced. So on the day I was granted the option of what our preachers called ‘leaving the faith,’ I left and increased my faith by so doing” (Preface).

My guess is that a lot of us have had experiences something like that. My guess is that there are a lot of people who see the church and formal, organized religion as an impediment to their own spirituality.

Over against the prevailing heaviness that characterizes a lot of religion, the ponderous piety, rules upon rules and the absolute certainty that we are right and everyone else is wrong, stands the Bible, particularly the psalms. In the psalms, the purpose of religion is to praise God. In the psalms, the object of the whole enterprise is to bring us to such an awareness of the goodness and grace and mystery of creation that we’re left in a state of awe and wonder with little to say but thank you.

Two-thirds of the way through the Psalter beginning around 95 there is a sequence of Psalms of praise, thanksgiving and adoration. I am always grateful when the lectionary brings us to them. Right in the middle of Psalms of Lament and Penitence, an eruption of joyful praise.

Psalm 96, on the agenda this evening —

O Sing
O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth
The verbs are urgent —
Sing — sing — sing
Declare his glory
Ascribe — ascribe — ascribe
Bring offerings — come into his courts
Worship — tremble

Sing — praise — worship — because God is — well, God.

“There is none like you, O God” Solomon prayed at the dedication of the Temple — a God of creation who is also, at the same time, a God of covenant and steadfast love.

I’m always struck by the tension between exclusivism and an inclusivity bordering on universalism in Israel’s religion.

Jahweh is our God, on the one hand. On the other hand, Jahweh is the God of all the nations, all people. We're all related — all children of God. It's there in the New Testament, as Jesus — particularly as St. Luke remembers him, breaks the taboos, crosses the barriers, welcomes the stranger, the unchosen, unclean, untouchables; remarkably responding to Jewish Elders' intercession for a Roman Centurion whose slave is sick and saying of him — gentile — pagan — "not even in Israel have I found such faith."

It's a shame the lectionary writers ask us to stop at verse 9 of Psalm 96. We Presbyterians aren't very good at obeying rules — so I won't. Besides Joe Sittler's pet peeve was the way to edit and truncate and emasculate and domesticate the Psalter. Verses 10-13 are magnificent. Now creation joins the praising and adoring:

"The heavens are laughing
earth rejoices
fields exult" (have you ever seen a field exult — they're getting ready to!)
"trees are singing for joy."

Wendell Berry, taking a Sabbath morning walk in the woods, wrote:

"Great trees, outspreading and upright
Apostles of the living light.
Patient as stars, they build in air
Tier after tier a timbered choir.
Stout beams upholding weightless grace
Of song, a blessing on this place . . . "

Religion in the Psalter is not about believing ideas about God to be true, but about praising and thanking God; it is not about theological certainty, but wonder and awe, laughter and rejoicing and silent reverence.

Poets join the psalmists here. Wendell Berry and Gerard Manley Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

And Walt Whitman:

"I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand not in the least. . . .
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four and each moment of them. . . .
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is signed by his name.
(*Twenty Poems to Nourish Your Soul,* Judith Valente and Charles Reynard, ed.)

It is the job of the poets to remind us of the profound holiness of the ordinary stuff of life, the presence of God at the heart of things. And one of the fascinating developments of our time is that science, traditionally regarded as the enemy of religion, with its rational, relentlessly logical methodology, is now, for many at least, an ally.

There's a new biography of Albert Einstein by Walter Isaacson, which deals with Einstein's faith. Asked all his life whether he believed in God, the great scientist one time said, "Yes. . . . Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find, behind all the discernible laws and connections, something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration for that force, beyond anything we can comprehend, is my religion."

"The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious," Einstein wrote.
(See "Einstein and Faith," *Time*, 6 April 2007).

Religion begins, as life does, in awe and wonder. To witness human birth, to hold in your arms a newborn, just moments after drawing a first breath: newly alive, fingers and toes, eyes and ears, the miraculous processes of seeing and hearing beginning to work, tiny heart and lungs functioning—life, new human life—is to be in the presence of the Holy. Paul Tillich said that basic wonder happens when we ponder the fact that there is something rather than nothing. "Viewed from the standpoint of nonbeing, being is a mystery," Tillich said. I never understood what that meant until I held a newborn in my arms and experienced the wonder that something exists that didn't exist before.

And to be present when a last breath is drawn and life ends, is, equally, to be in the presence of a mystery beyond our understanding. It is also to stand in awe and wonder at the amazing miracle of human life.

"Sing to the Lord a new song," the Psalmist wrote, and I imagine someone in the back row saying, "What's wrong with the old song?" There is, of course, a conversation like that happening throughout the whole church, although I suspect that you Lutherans are more civil about it than we are. There's something about us Presbyterians that loves a fight and can turn every conflict into a life and death struggle. Sometimes it escalates into what has been described as Worship Wars.

I am a traditionalist. With any luck I'll retire before I have to fight the Worship Wars at Fourth Presbyterian — but just a word or two.

Worship should point to God, not to me, or my emotions, or my spirituality. Worship is the one activity that ought to call me out of myself,

call me to forget myself for a few minutes and focus on the mystery and otherness of God. Worship does not need to be boring: should not be boring.

Pipe organs are not generically boring. And acoustical guitars are not generically interesting. I've heard boring organists and boring guitarists. My argument with contemporary worship is not that it is contemporary. Bring on more contemporaniety. My argument is with boredom, repetition, dumbed down music and dumbed down theology.

In the March 25 edition of *The Christian Century* Nicholas Wolterstorff commented on the aesthetics of worship. "The first consideration is whether this music or this art fits what we are doing and saying in the liturgy. . . Four electric guitars, an electronic keyboard, three young women holding hand mikes, leading us in a praise song that begins, 'Oh, how I appreciate you Jesus.' Do these words and this music fit Jesus, divine Son of God, who dwelt among us, was crucified, and rose from the dead? The music and the words are aesthetically bad. But worse yet, they don't fit."

"American Christians," Wolterstorff says, "in their passion for relevance, have all too often mindlessly borrowed from secular culture, while at the same time railing against 'secular humanism.'"

For Christians, the heart of the matter is God's love, which we experience in creation, in the miracle of human life, and fundamentally in Jesus Christ. And it begins not with rational explanation or theological argument; it begins in wonder—at the mystery of the world and our lives in it, the creative power beyond our ability to understand intellectually and which will not be reduced to creeds or theological propositions. "Two wonders I confess," the old hymn puts it: "The wonder of redeeming love and my unworthiness."

And so Jesus, as he faced his own death, on the very night of his arrest, the night before he died, wanting to tell his friends how deeply he loved them, how his love was God's love, how if they simply looked around at the world they would know that the world is full of God's grandeur and love, did the most extraordinary thing: took two items from ordinary life—daily bread, daily wine—and created a liturgy, a small artful act:

This is my body for you.
This is my blood for you.

This is the mystery of God's love for the world and everything in it; this is the mystery and miracle of God's presence in the common, everyday stuff of life. This bread and this wine is a reminder that God is present at every table, in every meal: bread and wine, wheat, fruit, in the grandeur of nature, the fields exulting, the trees singing, and the promise of the Risen Christ.

my body for you.
my blood for you.
the mystery of God’s love for you.

“And do sing to the Lord all the earth
tell of his salvation
declare his glory
For great is the Lord
and greatly to be praised.” Amen